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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [SMIG](#) [AU](#) [NO](#) [RS](#) [SW](#) [PL](#)
SUBJECT: IOM'S FACILITATION OF CHECHNYA RETURNS RISKS ITS
CREDIBILITY

REF: 09 WARSAW 1222

Classified By: ACTING DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION SUSAN ELLIOTT, REASON 1.4
(B AND D).

11. (C) Summary: In collaboration with the Austrian government, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) started a pilot project in November 2009 that assists voluntary returns and reintegration for migrants returning from Austria to Chechnya. IOM also continues to aid returns from other European countries to Chechnya under the organization's broader facilitation of returns to the Russian Federation. Representatives of international organizations, representatives of nongovernmental organizations, and private citizens expressed compelling concerns to us that returnees to Chechnya face serious risks of physical and economic insecurity. End Summary.

Between a Rocky Europe and a Hard Chechnya

12. (SBU) Under the direction of sending countries in Europe, IOM implements voluntary assistance to migrants returning from Europe to Russia. The flow of IOM-assisted migrants returning from Europe to the North Caucasus has increased from 621 in 2007 to 1,688 in January-September 2009. In response to this increased migration flow, IOM developed a comprehensive voluntary return and reintegration assistance pilot project for migrants from Austria to Russia's Chechen Republic. The goal of the program is to provide these migrants with pre-departure counseling, post-return assistance, and financial support to ensure their successful reintegration in their native republic.

13. (SBU) European countries granted asylum or residence permits on humanitarian grounds to fewer Chechens in 2009 than in previous years, thus creating demand for support for return as a durable solution. Seija Saarelainen, an Immigration Attache at the Norwegian Embassy in Moscow, told us on October 16 that from January to September 2009 more than 90 percent of Russian asylum seekers in Norway were from Chechnya, and Norway granted asylum or residence permits to 13 percent of all Russian asylum seekers. Saarelainen told us that the asylum seekers who are denied asylum or a residence permit usually appeal the decision, and since the appeal process is lengthy she did not know what would happen to any of those who were denied their appeals in 2009. Per Hedqvist, an analyst for the Swedish Migration Board, told us December 3 that 111 failed asylum seekers with Chechen registered as their native language have returned from Sweden to Russia this year; the Swedish Migration Board does not register ethnicity or specific Russian region of return.

14. (C) For some Chechens, returning to Chechnya is the best choice among few options. An internal IOM report given us November 5 indicated that one of the reasons people choose to return is "pending deportation to Poland as a result of the Dublin II Regulation." (Note: Reftel reports on grave

economic and protection concerns for Chechens in Poland that led to a tense December 15 stand-off between refugees and border guards there. End Note.) Aslanbek Isayev, an ethnic Chechen who works as a lawyer in Chechnya, told us November 19 that he "know(s) people who are in Europe who meet the criteria for the voluntary return program, and they are worried about their future. They see two possibilities: the first is that there are no perspectives for building a future in Europe, and the second is that they are not sure what will happen if they return to Chechnya."

Returnees' Physical Safety in Question

15. (C) Refcoord contacts in international and nongovernmental organizations expressed misgivings about the feasibility of stable reintegration for returnees. Their first concern is about risks to the migrants' physical safety. Kameta Saidova, an ethnic Chechen staff member of the Humanitarian Aid Department of the European Commission (ECHO) Moscow office, commented November 18 that "the situation is difficult. One hears of cases of disappearances, and allegedly the disappearances are not necessarily linked to participation with the rebels or other parties. . . .I would not advise someone to return if he or she asked my opinion."

16. (C) Private citizens are also wary of the prospects for people returning to Chechnya. An ethnic Chechen referred to us by ECHO's Saidova told us November 25, "The situation in Chechnya is absolutely unpredictable. You cannot plan anything, and you do not know whether there will be a next

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morning." This individual grew up in Chechnya but left with his family 10 years ago and now lives in Moscow; he continues to visit Chechnya occasionally but does not plan to move out of Moscow in the foreseeable future. He told us that his wife and cousins, who are also ethnic Chechens living in Moscow, are not willing to move back to Chechnya either.

17. (C) Absence of protection entities to care for the returnees adds to concern for their physical safety. It has been over a year since the last time UNHCR asked the GOR to allow it to open an office in Grozny to monitor returns; previously it received repeated refusals. The leading protection NGO in Chechnya, Memorial, only recently resumed its work in Chechnya following a months-long shutdown necessitated by security concerns. Memorial will proceed with great caution, having suffered the loss of its foremost activist in the republic, Natalya Estemirova, who in July was kidnapped and murdered, apparently with official complicity. Without close monitoring of the situation on the ground in Chechnya, IOM can only have incomplete information about the return environment. Tainamat Saidulaeva, an ethnic Chechen ECHO Moscow office staff member, told us November 18, "The current security situation is not very good. People working in Chechnya for organizations defending human rights are not willing to lend them (returnees) protection. . . .They themselves do not feel protected enough." Lamenting Memorial's lengthy shuttering, Allison Gill, director of Human Rights Watch in Russia, told us November 25, "Since July 15, Human Rights Watch does not know what is going on in Chechnya. That should give any asylum officer pause about sending people back."

18. (C) Chechen migrants with ties or suspected ties to alleged insurgents are highly vulnerable to violence in case of return. According to newspaper reports, a Chechen wrestler who had been living in exile in Azerbaijan, Artur Dugzayev, was killed by security forces November 5 in Grozny for an alleged link to rebels. Leyla Nugmanova, Senior Protection Officer at UNHCR Baku, told us November 17 that Dugzayev, 20, was traveling to Chechnya to visit relatives and earn money. Nugmanova reported, "The family believes that this happened solely due to his kinship with a Chechen

family that was and continues to be in strong opposition to the present regime." Extrajudicial punishments are of course not unusual in Chechnya. A July 2009 Human Rights Watch report, for example, catalogs 26 cases of punitive home burnings that can be attributed to Chechen law enforcement personnel between June 2008 and June 2009. The report observes, "All the affected families whose homes were burned are close relatives of alleged insurgents. The impunity for those who carried out destruction of their homes has been absolute."

Housing and Economic Uncertainty for Returnees

¶9. (C) Returnees to Chechnya will also face the challenge of securing long-term shelter. IOM is aware of this problem, acknowledging in an internal report that the republic's housing and public utility (water, gas, and electricity) infrastructures are weak due to damage from armed conflict. Even though IOM addresses the issue by providing returnees with financial assistance for housing (using funding from the European countries of departure), Inna Gladkova, UNHCR's Protection Officer for the North Caucasus, expressed concern that the returnees would not be able to obtain housing that meets minimum humanitarian standards. In a November 20 e-mail Gladkova stated, "Specific socio-economic conditions and the present-day political situation in Chechnya do not ensure the preconditions of secure and dignified repatriation. . . .Chechen officials informed UNHCR several times in 2008 and 2009 that their priority was to resolve housing issues of people who are already in Chechnya and in need of housing, and therefore they have no plans or absorption capacity for those intending to return."

¶10. (C) Returnees to Chechnya will encounter a bleak economic situation in the republic. The official unemployment rate in 2009 was about 50 percent but in reality could be even higher, according to the Norwegian Refugee Council's Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. Citing information from the Russian Federal Statistics Service, the IOM report noted that the average number of months spent searching for a job in the Chechen Republic is 13.1, the highest of all Russian regions. IOM plans to assist returnees from Austria in the pilot project with job placement, and selected returnees will receive small business set-up grants. Asked about the dire economic situation in Chechnya, Julia Zelenskaya, IOM's Readmission Program Assistant, told us November 5 that Chechens are "very inventive."

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Comment

¶11. (C) Given current conditions in the eastern North Caucasus, it is risky for IOM's institutional credibility for the Moscow mission to undertake a project focused on facilitating returns to Chechnya. (Note: IOM Movement Management Department Chief Michel Tonneau, who is based in Geneva, acknowledged to Refcoord at a meeting in Washington December 2 that he was not even aware of the IOM Moscow project -- his ignorance suggesting a lack of headquarters oversight. Tonneau expressed surprise that his colleagues in Russia would pursue returns where there is no IOM monitoring capacity. End note.) We believe it is not advisable to promote returns to Chechnya until the insecure political and economic climate improves and monitoring capacity increases substantially. The international community should hold IOM accountable if any of the participants in its return program to Chechnya suffers extrajudicial loss of life or liberty.
Rubin